DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 317 CS 215 290

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TITLE Coming from the Heart: Black Students on Literacy Experiences.

PUB DATE 25 Mar 95

NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).

PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Basic Writing; *Black Culture; *Black Dialects; *Black Students; Case Studies; Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; Interviews; *Language Usage; *Literacy; Student Reaction

IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *African Americans; Afrocentrism; *Black Communication; Discourse Communities; Rhetorical Stance; Student Empowerment; Writing Style

ABSTRACT

A study focused attention on the academic personas acquired by two AAVE-oriented (African American Vernacular English) beginning writers as reflected by their speech in informal settings and the style they employed in academic tasks. The study explores the degree to which literacy experiences (home and school) affect students' lives. It was guided by the following hypotheses: (1) that AAVE-oriented students prefer to employ Black rhetorical patterns in their writing; (2) that students' meaning is suppressed by the constructs of academic discourse; (3) that the distinct learning and language styles of AAVE-oriented students must be tapped to form a union between the discourse patterns of academia and the discourse patterns of the AAVE-oriented students. For the study, two students were selected from demographic surveys; they were interviewed for 90 minutes using a 3-step interview procedure. Writing samples were also collected. Excerpts from the interviews and details about the students' experience of being Black in literacy-related situations suggest that African-American students need to be taught that they are heirs of a tradition that has used Black discourse to express thought with power and clarity. They should be encouraged to tap into the rhetorical styles of the wordsmiths, from Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin. An Afrocentric writing pedagogy would be grounded in a theory that takes into account the historical position of AAVE speakers and the legacy of freedom as literacy. (Contains 9 references.) (TB)

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ED 395 317

Coming from the Heart: Black Students on Literacy Experiences

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First Presented as a paper at the 46th Annual
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Washington, D. C.

March 25, 1995

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Coming from the Heart: Black Students on Literacy Experiences

If you black, get back
if you brown, stick around
if you yellow, you mellow
if you white, you right

Before the 1960s Black Power Movement, this African American Vernacular English (AAVE) children's rhyme referred to the mostly unwritten rule which stated that the closer you and your ideology are to White Anglo Saxon Protestant, the better your chances of assimilating into mainstream white middle class society. Is this rhyme still remotely related to philosophies which influence composition pedagogy in our classrooms today? Many educators are aware of who they are, their position in American society as gatekeepers. We can keep out students from the AAVE culture, those who just wouldn't fit in comfortably, and thereby perpetuate further injustice; or, we can welcome such students, who would expand our thinking, as we help them and ourselves to grow. How do pro Black language instructors help students who choose not to play the game, or those who can't play the game?

Janis Epps writes,

> It is Freire's definition of literacy, " a conscious intervention in one's context," which has eluded [African] Americans and kept us from becoming truly literate. We have not been allowed to acquire true literacy. That acquisition would necessitate an analysis of who we are and would point a critical

> finger at the continued racist and classist nature of America. Such an analysis would not focus simply on the horrors of slavery, but rather on the horrors of the legacy of slavery in American classrooms today. (155)

The miseducation of African American youth has a long history. It has only been since the 1960s that Black Language, culture, ideology, world view, social conditioning, and learning styles have been recognized as distinct and essential in the education of African American students. African American students were permitted into mainstream classrooms, and it became apparent that there was a need to adjust teaching strategies to fit the needs of the students. Multicultural and Afrocentric pedagogies are attractive because they require that students be placed at the centers of their worlds.

In this respect, the literacies of AAVE-oriented students have become of growing interest to scholars. A fundamental aspect of this research has been to identify and define the Black discourse style or Black rhetorical patterns as these manifest themselves in AAVE-oriented student-authors texts. Noonan-Wagner (1981) is influenced by Smitherman's (1977) suggestion that much of the Black discourse style is maintained and transmitted by the linguistic and cultural traditions of the Black church. Noonan-Wagner hypothesized that writing of students from the Black vernacular culture would reflect features of the Black preacher's rhetoric. Using teachers who were trained to identify features

of Black rhetoric, the following were found to be those most closely associated with the writing of AAVE-oriented students: "references to the Bible, redundancy, sermonizing and/or moralizing, use of quotations, and word choice" (18). In exploring the relation between the AAVE-oriented students' texts and the oral tradition, Visor (1987) finds that such students' writing evinces "cultural contextualization features (CCF)." She points out that such features are identified in the literature perjoratively as unsupported assumptions, disconnected ideas, unexplicated examples and truncated logic. In terms of the AAVE oral tradition, the students used repetition, indirection, shared knowledge, and fraternity of perspective.

Ball (1992) identified AAVE oral features in students' informal written and oral expository texts. She found that AAVE speaking students insert narrative into written expository text and sometimes use it to carry the main point which is not a standard rhetorical device. Ball further identifies the circumlocutory pattern. She describes circumlocution as a series of topics that are implicitly linked to a main theme but that seem illogical and pointless to speakers of the language of wider communication. Ball (1992) also found that AAVE students prefer orally based patterns in their writing. After students were trained to recognize two mainstream patterns of text organization and two vernacular based organizational patterns, students preferred vernacular based organization patterns (narrative interspersion and circumlocution) in both academic and

conversational tasks.

A study by Richardson (1993) sought to extrapolate Black rhetorical patterns from one AAVE-oriented student's text. Using Gates' theory of signifying (Black reading and writing) and Bahktin's theory of dialogic language and applying these theories to the reading of the student's text, Richardson uncovered rhetorical codes distinct to AAVE-oriented students, one of which is cultural ideographic use of language. Cultural ideographic language involves invocation of crucial concepts in a cultural groups' shared historical experience, such concepts serve to trip the sacred register of the Black experience. Another distinctly Black rhetorical feature that surfaced in the reading of the student text was the revision of the "freedom as literacy" theme of the Black experience. Identified by Gates as the "Talking Book Trope," this theme is the most pervasive in the history of texts written by African Americans. In its original form, the theme consists of an illiterate slave who overhears and sees his master reading (talking) from a prayer book. Relating his condition as chattel object (slave) to his inability to read, the slave's life's dream is to become literate and thus become a "speaking subject," worthy of freedom. Other distincly Black rhetorical features that Richardson identified in the student's text were structural call/response, doublevoicedness, and repetition.

Smitherman's (1994) work with the NAEP included around 2800 essays. One of her goals was to identify a distinctly Black

discourse style in the writing of 17 year old AAVE-oriented students. Smitherman's criteria for "African American discourse in black student writing" included: " rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language"; "reference to color-race-ethnicity"; "use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses"; "sermonic tone..."; "direct address-conversational tone"; "cultural references"; "ethnolinguistic idioms"; "verbal inventiveness"; "cultural values-community consciousness" and "field dependency."

While one of the goals of the present study was to similarly delineate AAVE discourse/rhetorical patterns and strategies in student texts, the scope of identified strategies and policies is broader. The present study focuses attention on the academic personas acquired by two AAVE-oriented beginning writers as reflected by their speech in informal settings and the style they employ in academic tasks. I have happened on a lot more than I bargained for in that what I have found raises issues of cultural difference, voice, assessment, and gender. This study explores the degree to which literacy experiences (home and school) affect students' lives. Although strides have been made to explore and expand the literacies of AAVE-oriented students, there are not a wealth of of studies which ask students about their language and literacy experiences.

Scholars of literacy and composition such as Friere and Elbow discuss the importance of individual and diverse voices, the importance of the heretofore voiceless being heard. In keeping with that spirit, I wish to present the voices of two

AAVE-oriented college students. As a result of reading related literature on concepts of literacy, I was particularly interested in the students' conceptions of language and literacy. Thus, I have conducted an ethnomethodological study, asking AAVE-or ienting students what they themselves might have to say about literacy acquisition and especially writing in educational institutions. The following hypotheses have guided this study: that AAVE-oriented students prefer to employ Black rhetorical patterns in their writing; that students' meaning is suppressed by the constructs of the academic essay; and that the distinct leaning and language styles of AAVE-oriented students must be tapped in order to form a union between the discourse patterns of academia and the discourse patterns of the AAVE-oriented student.

What follows is extrapolated from a larger ethnomethodological study which included interviews of two students who were AAVE speakers. The two students discussed here are a male and a female, Mickey and Rhonda (pseudonyms). Last year, I met and interviewed them when they were enrolled in a beginning writing course at a major Midwestern university. I observed their classes over the semester and analyzed pieces of their writing.

Methodology

Two students were selected from demographic surveys distributed to a basic writing class which had as its focus the literatues of most every culture including Eurpoean ethnic groups, Latino groups, African\American groups, Asian American

groups and Native American groups. I interviewed Mickey and Rhonda each for 90 minutes using Seidman's 3 interview procedure (30 minutes on each segment). All sessions were tape recorded. I collected writing samples from both students. I asked both participants the same prompts except where conversation led to other topics in which case I pursued whatever topic that came up.

Literacy Experiences

Both students pointed to situations in their educational experiences that could be attributed to the way they think of themselves and the way that they present themselves in writing. Mickey told me a story about an exciting paper he wrote in 12th grade on the topic of what it meant to be African American. He said that he learned a lot from writing it and that his teacher told him that his writing style would not be accepted by White America. When asked, "why not?" He explained that "I write from my heart, not from my mind." He said that his teacher encouraged him to continue to write the way that he did. I told him that no teacher ever told me to keep writing the way I wrote in 12th grade.

I think we can get a clearer idea of what it means to write from the heart if we examine a literacy event that occurred the semester I met Mickey. Mickey says,

> I wrote this one paper about Proposal A, and it was like, I was tellin that it would do nothin for school funding. ...And it was like a white student wrote about how his school was so beautiful...And I was like

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> what is this? He got a 4.0, and I got a 2.0.... I wrote that paper from my heart!

Mickey writes,

> In another political style robbery, Governor John Engler attempts to steal more money from the taxpayers of Michigan.
>
> ...From my data I found that areas with very low property are funded very low. Southgate, a predominately white district where academic achievement and property values are low reminds me much of Metro Detroit....

Mickey has no reservations about using "I" or personal reflection, and personal experience to validate his points. Using written standard English criteria, the draft of the Proposal A paper has punctuation errors, some non-standard verb forms etc., and some unclear sentences; Mickey asks thirteen rhetorical questions in a six page paper. His questions, combined with personal reflection and testimony give the paper a distinct conversational tone which are attributes of the Black discourse style. Unfortunately, by academic standards, Mickey's distinctly Black voice is unheard. The concept of voice is an important topic in composition pedagogy. If we hear June Jordan's (1985) comments on the Black voice, the plot surely thickens:

Coming from the Heart

> One main benefit following from the person-centered values of [AAVE] is that of clarity. If your idea, your sentence assumes the presence of at least two living and active people, you will make it understandable because the motivation behind every sentence is the wish to say something real to somebody real.

Jordan says that "if you speak or write [AAVE], your ideas will necessarily possess that otherwise elusive attribute, voice."

In reflecting on the work that he put into his paper and the 2.0 grade he got, Mickey says,

> She said [the instructor] it wasn't clear. But I mean how could it be when it was deep? That's something I don't understand.

Students like Mickey are largely unrewarded for demonstrating competence in their home language.

Rhonda told me a story about a literacy event that happened in fifth grade. I believe this event influences the way she represents herself in academic speech and writing. A Korean American who "hung out with whites" accidentally hit her with a hockey puck in the shin while playing field hockey at her predominently white school. She screamed, "Ouch, that hurted!" The Korean American schoolmate corrected her speech while everyone laughed and she cried. She said her white friends used

to correct her all the time too, and this helped her to learn to code switch early on in certain situations.

In the initial questionnaire that Rhonda filled out for me, she identified the following as characteristics of good writing:

> if you use words correctly, use proper grammar
> if your sentences are complete and understandable
> if you organize information effectively

During our interview, Rhonda explained how free she currently feels to write what she wants in her papers:

> ...[S]he let's us write about what we want to write about. You know we read the material and when we get to the part where it's time to write papers, your whole topic comes from you.... I like when I can write about who I want to write about and say what I wanna say.

In her response to Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Rhonda writes:

> ...Claudia describes Maureen as a disrupter of seasons, a high yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back (p.52-53). There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk. [sic]

Although Rhonda feels free to say what she wants to say in her writing, it is hard to distinguish her words from Morrison's. It

is clear that the first sentence is Morrison's. The second sentence reads like plagiarism, although it could be a case of improper citation. The point is that the student's voice is not discernable. Note too, Rhonda received a 3.5 on this paper. There's a lot to be said about a system which rewards structure over originality. My bet is Rhonda's absence of voice is related to her not wanting to be "hurted" again.

Bakhtin (1981) says that the historical, ideological, and sociological context which one associates with literacy and language use influences meaning. One's language orientation influences the ways in which one describes the world. Rhetorical stances are informed by and express certain ideological stances. Mickey's rhetorical/ideological stance appears to be "I am AAVE-oriented, it is not acceptable in the classroom, but I gotta come from the heart." Rhonda's rhetorical/ideological stance is a bit different: "I am AAVE oriented, it is not acceptable in the classroom," so coming from the heart for Rhonda is off limits. She has constructed an academic persona for herself that gets her "ovah." She plays the game within the structure of the system, a system that is institutionally racist. I might add, too, that the course instructor was pro Black Language. However, as a representative of the profession, the instructor feels she is held accountable for teaching "academic discourse." My question again is: how do pro Black Language teachers help students who refuse to play the game, or those who can't play the game? Further still, how do we help students like Rhonda, who have been

beaten into submission, who hide their voices behind the voices of others?

Being an African American student in white middle class society is complex in and of itself. Being an African American male complicates the situation further for students like Mickey. This student was very conscious of his position in society as a Black male. He was an avid reader of African American history and very astute in politics. How do we help him to construct an academic persona that he can live with, one that doesn't ask him to relinquish his voice or to wear a mask?

Some instructors would suggest that we familiarize ourselves with the connection between language use, rhetorical posture and ideological stance. But somehow I don't feel it is enough. Others suggest we familiarize ourselves with the discourse patterns of the AAVE oral tradition and how and why these features may surface in the writing of our students. But somehow I feel that isn't enough. What I believe we should do is allow students to explore and experiment with the AAVE oral tradition to expand the student's repertoire of available styles. We must develop ways of incorporating the students' cultural literacy experience with those needed to enhance their futures, and to succeed in a society where only one kind of literacy is valued. I believe an Afrocentric approach to composition instruction is needed to achieve this goal. An Afrocentric approach would emphasize the political essence of the Black voice in American history. Blacks have a tradition of writing and reading their

way to freedom. Students need to know that Blacks think and that Black thinkers have used the Black discourse style to express thought with power and clarity. Students need to be taught to see themselves as heirs to this tradition, and they should be encouraged to tap into the rhetorical styles of the wordsmiths, from Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells to James Baldwin and Sistah Souljah. The constrasts between the AAVE discourse style and the discourse conventions of the Language of Wider Communication should be taught explicitly. An Afrocentric writing pedagogy would be grounded in a theory that takes into account the historical position of AAVE speakers, and the legacy of freedom as literacy. Students need to know the very socio-political-ideological essence of what it means to be Black and to write.

If we move in this way, we may help to create a new multivoiced rhyme which rings with true literacy and justice for all:

> If you (are) white, that's alright
> if you're yellow, you're still my fellow
> if you brown, keep gettin down
> And if you black, you on the right track

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